





Berkeley Backyard August 2026

Reflections

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I snapped this photo on August 5 in my backyard in Berkeley. It captures something I love about this place: that slightly unruly mixture of an old house and a garden that seems determined to grow wherever it pleases.

That's my studio door on the left, with a 25 year old fig tree leaning away from the house. The white flower is an agapanthus—one of many around the property—but this particular bloom is extraordinary, nearly 14 inches across. It opened in partial shade and became this enormous, loose burst of white. Before I fenced the yard, the deer kept much of this vegetation neatly mowed to the ground. Now that the deer are out, I've discovered I have an entirely different backyard. Apparently, if left alone, Berkeley will grow just about anything.

The big, somewhat battered leaves sprawling across the foreground are bear's breeches, or acanthus. Some of the older leaves are naturally yellowing and dying back, while the tall dried flower stalks rise above them. I've always loved the historical connection: stylized acanthus leaves became one of the great motifs of classical architecture, most famously wrapping the capitals of Corinthian columns. So even the slightly ragged, decaying parts of this garden have a kind of beauty and a very long history behind them.

The house itself was built in 1923. Much of what you see here is still the original California stucco—cement hand-troweled onto the walls, patched here and there during the past century but remarkably intact. Even the gray-green window and door trim has a story. When we moved in, all the trim was white. We eventually discovered that this gray was the original 1923 color, so we brought it back. Grey on grey.

There's another bit of mystery to the house. Berkeley's great fire of 1923 swept through the hills nearby, destroying nearly 600 homes. This house was also built in 1923, suffered a fire of its own, and was rebuilt that same year—yet it sits a block beyond the mapped edge of the great fire, and none of the neighboring houses on the street burned. Why this one house caught fire, and whether its fire was somehow connected to the larger disaster nearby, may never be known. Adding to the mystery, the original owner's last name was Hunt, a fact I discovered scrawled on an old board left in the basement.

The house is now more than a century old, sitting on an unusually large double lot surprisingly close to downtown Berkeley. There will always be another repair, another historical question, another decision about what to preserve and what to change. I increasingly think of myself less as its owner than its current caretaker.

And this photograph somehow captures the spirit of the place: the old stucco and gray trim, the garden pressing in around the house, things growing a little too freely and aging in their own way. It is not manicured or especially orderly, but that may be part of what makes it feel so alive. A little worn, a little wild, and very Berkeley. I feel extraordinarily fortunate to be here.